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(Previously "Consumer Commodities in the Museum: Design as Art?")

From the beginning of Western art theory in ancient Greece, there existed a certain tension with respect to the relation of the functional arts such as design to the fine arts. Plato's commentary on the arts embraced both *techne*, referring to functional arts intended to aid mankind in adapting to nature, and *mimesis* or representational arts such as pictures, poems, and theater performances whose main task was cultivation of the mind. Yet he did not answer the question of how these two categories of arts are related, or whether they share a common aesthetic. His mimetic arts formed the basis of the "fine arts" as understood by Kant, Hegel, and others from the eighteenth century to the present. For the most part, modern aesthetic theories have concentrated on the fine arts with only cursory attention to the functional arts including design. This practice began to change somewhat with the rise of industrial design in the early to mid twentieth century, as Henry Dreyfuss, Norman Bel Geddes, Raymond Loewy, and other industrial designers began to express their ideas arising out of a need to merge the functional and the aesthetic. Their challenge was to create utilitarian products which were also visually and emotionally appealing to consumers. Gradually these products have begun to appear in art museums alongside works of fine arts, thus raising the question of their place in the context of the aesthetics of the art museum.

Innovative modern technologies, in conjunction with the artistic contributions of industrial designers, have generated a wide range of consumer products admired for their aesthetic features as well as their utility. Some of these products indeed rival works of fine art as objects of aesthetic interest and have become candidates for display in art museums. An examination of the role of such consumer products in the art museum provides a fruitful context for considering some aspects of perspectives on the arts and technology. Central to this inquiry is the question of whether a different set of aesthetic values than those commonly attributed to the fine arts is required by extending the canon of the art museum to include the products of industrial technology. Also of interest is the question of how the introduction of consumer products alongside paintings, sculptures, and other fine arts into a setting typically reserved for these objects affects the way we think of the art museum. Immediately it is clear that we can no longer think of the art museum

along the lines of a repository for rare treasures. It will be necessary instead to think of it as an open forum for interpreting art in its many different forms.

Art museums have typically based their collections and exhibitions on a narrow scope of art practices identified with a notion of aesthetics that favors such features as originality, uniqueness, intrinsic worth, expressiveness, and cognitive appreciation. This focus has provided a basis for the collection, conservation, and interpretation of art as an enhancement of the mind and spirit. It has also resulted in criticism of the museum as a tool of the social elite and a perpetrator of class distinctions.

It is my intent to argue here that the task of the art museum, in conjunction with artists and the community, is to present and interpret the finest representations of artistic expression in a broad range of media, extending from painting and sculpture to video, film, and installations, and including the products of technology and industrial design as well as other cultural artifacts. It can be said that each practice and its attending media displays a different sense of art. Painting, on one hand, draws upon the skills, feelings, and thoughts of individual artists to provide images that contribute to the development of imagination and to respond to emotional and intellectual needs for creative expression and contemplation. On the other hand, industrial design is a stage, along with engineering, manufacture, and marketing, in the creation of a consumer product. The design must serve the idea provided by the client. While a Porsche can be admired for its aesthetic features (whether or not these are the same features expected in a painting will be a subject for later discussion), it must also perform its utilitarian function as an automobile. Thus, in my view, both fine art and industrial design/consumer products are functional, but in a slightly different sense.

My focus is on the place of industrial design/consumer products in the museum. Despite the recognition of industrial design since the early part of the twentieth century, and the fact that Greek amphoras, Medieval armor, and Japanese Samurai swords are readily admitted to the art museum, many art museums appear reluctant to display industrial design/consumer products or to recognize them as anything more than peripheral to art. I argue here that industrial design can be considered a subset of the practice of art and that its products are suitable candidates for presentation and interpretation in an art museum setting. In taking this position, it is necessary to see the art museum as being more open and inclusive than is sometimes envisioned by its critics as well as by some of its more iconoclastic practitioners who seek to exclude all but a narrow range of art.

At some point during the industrial age, especially during the first third of this century, the consumer products shaped by the emerging technologies in the hands of industrial designers began to compete with the museum art as a source of imagery and objects intended to satisfy the desires and needs of the "elite" as well as the "masses." Industrial designers, who often received the same training as fine artists, provided the creative designs for the industrial products produced by the manufacturers. Offering far greater accessibility than the art museum, outlets for consumer products in the department store, the shopping mall, and automobile, audio, video, computer, and other specialty centers have had substantial success in capturing the minds of people in virtually all segments of society. The range of objects available includes "designer" products which, though undeniably utilitarian, have been chosen especially for their aesthetic features.

In the context of the world art market, works of fine art also share with utility-based design objects the property of economic exchange value when they function as objects that can be bought and sold.[1] The very same works of art that might be destined for a museum at a future time often function in the interim as consumer products in commercial galleries, auction houses, and private collections. Occasionally, department stores or com-

mercial malls incorporate museum art into their promotional efforts by presenting art in their respective spaces. All of these activities suggest that any attempts to sharply differentiate among the various arts will be impacted by economic as well as aesthetic considerations. A "past" in a commercial context does not necessarily preclude a work of art's role as a source of aesthetic import in a museum setting. For such thinkers as Jean Baudrillard, the central problem for art in the late twentieth century has been to define its role in this system of exchange. In such a context as is provided by Baudrillard, aesthetic properties, traditionally linked with art's ability to satisfy certain human needs for creative expression and contemplation, could not have the same import as they have enjoyed in the past.

The need to ponder the relative absence of the products of industrial design in art museums has perhaps become more critical as public taste throughout the world has embraced industrial design/machine made consumer products as a source of aesthetic satisfaction (Pontus Hulen 1968; 11). Despite the popularity of such objects outside the museum, there has been relatively little representation of the products of industry in art museums, except perhaps in the museum shop.

There are notable exceptions in which art museums have sponsored the occasional industrial design show. In Great Britain, the British Institute of Industrial Art, founded in 1914, organized exhibitions and established a modest permanent collection of industrial products at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Philip Johnson's 1934 exhibition, *The Machine Art*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was the first major exhibition of industrial design products in an American museum. This exhibition signaled the beginning of critical and public recognition that contemporary consumer products enhanced by design warrant a place in the art museum. Subsequent exhibitions in New York, Milwaukee, and elsewhere have recognized the place of industrial design/consumer products in the museum.[2] Nevertheless, nearly 60 years after Johnson's pioneering exhibition, few art museums are willing to open their galleries to the display of industrial products.

Conceptual links between the machine products of industrial design and the art of the museum can be found in certain art movements of the twentieth century. The Bauhaus school of applied arts, which functioned in Germany from 1919 to 1933, attempted to reunite all forms of artistic activity, and provided a laboratory for developing a close relationship between artist-designers and industry. Futurist, Dadaist, and Surrealist artists of the early twentieth century and artists into the present have continued to explore this relationship. The Italian Futurist Balla and the French artist Picabia introduced machine elements and their own machine-inspired interpretations of power and space into their art. Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* 1915–1923; Man Ray's *Perpetual Motif*, 1972 (originally *The Object to be Destroyed*, 1923); and Jean Tinguely's *Homage to Duchamp*, 1960, all incorporate industrial products and machine imagery. In the practice of art today, one finds many examples of art that resembles industrial products. Anthony Caro, Rosemarie Trockel, Andrea Zittel, Chris Burden, and other contemporary artists regularly employ artifacts that reveal the influences of industrial products.

There is a recognized evolution of machine and consumer product aesthetics which was recently documented in *The Machine Age in America, 1918–1941*, an exhibition organized in 1986 by the Brooklyn Museum (Wilson, Pilgrim, and Tashjian 1986). During the period covered by this exhibition, design aesthetics embraced several styles including the machine-inspired decorative geometry of Art Deco, a "pure" machine centering on the Bauhaus, the streamline era of Norman Bel Geddes, and the biomorphic phases of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen who attempted to create forms more in harmony with nature. The Brooklyn exhibition, which focused on aesthetics and social context of the industrial design objects, thus attempted to

bridge the gap between industrial arts and the art of the museum by linking the aesthetics of design to styles also operative in the fine arts.

Rudolf Arnheim finds in design products functions corresponding to those of other works of art. He contends that, "In good design, the object not only serves its practical function but also expresses in its visual appearance the way of life that invented it" (Arnheim 1989; 53). Arnheim believes that design must represent and interpret its object as well as satisfy any practical conditions for its use. The key to good design thus is meaningful expression, as it is for all art. Given these assumptions, industrial designers join painters and sculptors in producing works that share a common aesthetic base and the common task of providing symbols that enable people to cope with the challenges of life.

Despite these lines of support for bringing industrial design objects into the museum, there remain substantial questions and concerns. Practitioners on both sides object to the inclusion of consumer products in the art museum. Taking a conservative view, the painter Ad Reinhardt argued, for instance, that the exclusive purpose of the art museum is to present and preserve visual fine art (Reinhardt 1978; 213). Others have questioned whether industrial design can be considered an art worthy of being presented in spaces where fine art is shown. Victor Papanek charges, for instance, that "design at present operates only as a marketing tool of big business" (Papenek 1971; 91). Both claims are too sweeping in their dismissal of industrial design/consumer products as suitable for presentation in an art museum.

Of considerable importance to the discourse over the place of industrial objects in the art museum is the question of possible incompatibilities between the aesthetics of museum art and the seemingly opposed aesthetics of consumer products. Pierre Bourdieu has proposed as an alternative to the aesthetics of uniqueness, originality, expression, and contemplation, typically associated with museum art: an aesthetics of consumption based on mass production, desire, sensation, and immediate gratification (Bourdieu 1984). To these properties I would add speed. Those operating from a perspective based upon an aesthetics of contemplation would undoubtedly prescribe criteria for exhibitable artifacts in the art museum that would exclude industrial design products based on a consumer aesthetic. Their criteria would require that objects suitable for presentation in an art museum serve no purposes apart from the expressive or contemplative. Such distinctions become increasingly difficult to sustain, however, when museum art also functions in many instances as consumer product and may to some degree incorporate production techniques involving replication and other processes of modern technology. Moreover, design products available in consumer outlets are often admired for the formal and expressive qualities that contribute to the appreciation of paintings, sculptures, and other visual art forms.

It is necessary to address such issues in the context of current debates on the very nature and function of the art museum. Entirely absent from the discussion thus far is the effect of a museum environment upon the interpretation of the objects displayed. In a less critical age it might have been sufficient to concur with Duchamp, that things become art by convention when they are placed in museums.[3] If that were the only issue, the presence of industrial products in the museum would pose no interesting practical or theoretical issues. However, for those who differ with Duchamp, further consideration of the functions of objects in museums is required.

In recent times, the museum has been under attack from many sides. Charges of elitism in the face of a growing demand for openness and receptivity to a variety of multicultural aesthetic perspectives offer substantial challenges to a single aesthetic point of view. Dissolving boundaries between popular culture and the arts now allow artists to draw upon a wider range of materials and means.

Economic necessities mandate that the museum undertake drastic measures to attract a wider segment of the population. On these grounds alone, it may behoove art museums to take a close look at industrial design products. Apart from any theoretical concerns, the dominant effects of new technologies upon imagery in our culture, and the immense fascination that the public finds with such objects, might suggest their potential for serving as bridges for audiences for whom access to art museums is difficult.

Theorists such as Bourdieu view the art museum as a means of perpetuating distinctions of social status among the "cultured" and the "uncultured," thereby differentiating between those who dominate society economically and politically and those who are dominated. For Bourdieu, the primary function of the art museum is to reinforce feelings of belonging and exclusion among the various segments of society (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991). My own view is more optimistic. I view the art museum as a laboratory for exploring and experiencing a broad range of creative achievements centering on the visual arts in a wide range of media from painting and sculpture to video and film, and encompassing such areas as industrial design products. The museum should also embrace collaborative efforts encompassing music, performance art, poetry, theater, and dance.

The question remains: What happens to industrial design products when they enter the art museum? Any answer must recognize the changing nature of the art museum in the late twentieth century, from a repository or treasure house of past and present works of art to an institution that actively courts greater public participation. Where the art museums of the past have emphasized conservation, as cultural systems of the present and future they will increasingly emphasize interpretation. This means that the museum has a primary role in communicating the meaning of the artifacts that shape the lives of its constituencies. As consumer products are presented in an art museum, they undergo certain transformations imposed by the cultural context in which they are placed. The museum itself is a complex cultural machine whose function is to provide a place where people can encounter important cultural symbols that may assist them in understanding their own and other cultures and in formulating their own self-understanding. While the symbolic character of a painting may be more obvious because it is not required to serve other functions, a stereo speaker offers interesting possibilities for its interpretation when looked at in a museum context. In the art museum we are led to focus upon the stereo speaker as a cultural symbol endowed with certain aesthetic features and to contemplate its meaning, which necessarily extends beyond its ability to provide good sound. Such encounters might force the viewer to reflect more closely upon the relation of aesthetics to utility, thereby deepening our sense of the place of aesthetics in the practical life. Formal, expressive,and utilitarian concerns, as well as social context, necessarily enter into its interpretation.

It may well be that the presumed opposition between an aesthetics of contemplation and the aesthetics of consumption, as it has been applied to designer-shaped consumer products, has been overstated. I prefer to think of contemplation and desire, creative idea and sensation, form and function, and the perception of uniqueness or mass produced features as a continuum of responses to objects. The art museum context with its particular sets of interpretive devices including a special architectural setting, curatorship, installation and lighting design, catalogue essays and visual documentation, lectures, and other pedagogical and promotional means heightens our awareness of all of these qualities and their relationships.

Given these considerations, it would appear that an exhibition of industrial design based consumer products has a place in the art museums of today. Such works may differ in important respects from the more traditional paintings, sculptures, and other works associated with the museum. They do not nec-

essarily address as wide a range of human concerns and experiences as one finds in the history of painting or even of contemporary painting. Human tragedy, spirituality, love, moral goodness, as well as greed and lust are perhaps missing from the range of concerns that one expects in an exhibition of industrial design based consumer products. On the other hand, such an exhibition demonstrates a broad range of human creativity which has enhanced considerably the scope and depth of human achievement. It also invites further reexamination of the role of the art museum in contemporary society.

Thus far in the discussion the question of how an art museum would differ from a history museum or a museum featuring technology and design has not been addressed. This question may require more consideration than can be provided here. Briefly the difference lies in the fact that interpretation in the art museum focuses attention on the aesthetic features of the objects and offers the viewers opportunities to see and interpret fine art and design objects in relation to each other. Through such experiences it may be possible to find common grounds as well as differences and to gain a better appreciation of the contributions of techonolgy to aesthetic experiences.

The analysis presented here thus raises important concerns with respect to the relation of art and technology within a specific context of art museums. The following are some of the critical issues: What kinds of objects are suitable for display in art museums? What is the impact of technology through industrial design/consumer products in a museum environment normally reserved for works of fine art? How does the introduction of such changes affect the aesthetics of the art museum? And do visitors require a different aesthetic perspective when viewing consumer products in the museum? Hopefully, this paper will serve as a catalyst for further discussion of these issues.[4]

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Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard has proposed that exchange value has replaced aesthetic value in the modern world art system. See Jean Baudrillard, *"The Beaubourg Effect: Implosion and Deterrence,"* October 20 (Spring 1982): 8. David Carrier has also discussed this matter in his essay, *"Baudrillard as Philosopher, Or the End of Abstract Painting*, Arts Magazine 63:1 (September 1988): 54–56.
2. In 1979 Curtis L. Carter and industrial designer Brooks Stevens jointly curated *"Art and Industry: the Art of Industrial Design,"* at Marquette University. In 1988 Harry Wirth curated *"Design 1"* at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.
3. See Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *"The Impressionist Revolution and Duchamp's Myopia,"* Arts Magazine 63:1 (September, 1988): 62.
4. I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the critical comments and suggestions of Professor Eddy Souffrant of the Marquette University Philosophy Department and James Scarborough, Curator of the Haggerty Museum of Art. Their remarks have undoubledly contributed to the strength of the paper.